DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 150 597 CS 203 916

AUTHOR Stone, Gerald C.; And Others
TITLE An Early Look at the Effects of ENG on Local Newscasts.
PUB DATE Aug 77
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (60th, Madison, Wisconsin, August 21-24, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Broadcast Industry; Content Analysis; *Electronic Equipment; Media Research; Media Technology; News Media; *News Reporting; *Production Techniques; *Programing (Broadcast); *Telecommunication; *Television

ABSTRACT

This study sought evidence that the switch to electronic news gathering (ENG) by local television stations has changed news selection or news presentation. A content analysis was performed during five days of newscasts at three network-operated Los Angeles television stations that were in various stages of converting to total ENG. Although the newscasts tended to "showcase" ENG reports (placing them in the early minutes of broadcast time), no significant differences existed in news selection or news presentation that could be attributed solely to ENG. The study concludes that ENG appears to be an internal efficiency move by local network news organizations and will not appreciably alter the emphasis in news reporting. (RL)

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AN EARLY LOOK AT THE EFFECTS OF ENG ON LOCAL NEWSCASTS

by

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Presented to the Radio-Television Division,
Association for Education in Journalism,
at the annual convention in Madison, Wisconsin,
August 21-24, 1977

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An Early Look at the Effects Of ENG

on Local Newscasts ,

During the past five years television news has seen a rapid acceleration of the use of electronic equipment to provide visual news.[1] Called ponderously "Electronic News Gathering: by some and simply "Electronic Journalism" by others, ENG is making its impact felt on the way television news is gathered and reported.

It is agreed that there is nothing really new about ENG. From the early days of television, the "live remote" has been one means of covering a story.[2] Since the late 1950s, video tape has been an integral part of television news,[3] and "portable" video cameras of a sort have been available for about the same length of time.[4] Over the years there has been a steady improvement in the quality and durability of these items combined with a steady shrinking of size and reduction in cost of both purchace and operation. The equipment has become more reliable and less difficult to operate.

In the late 1960s, there was a minor boom in interest in portable video tape equipment for television stations, but much of that equipment failed to live up to expectations. For a time, it appeared the switch to video news coverage was still a decade or more away. What happened then, when the three major networks made the decision to shift to ENG was not a revolution in technology, but one in the way people accepted the existing technology. In essence, the networks had said "It's good enough now," and the switch from film to video was on.

Electronic journalism comprises three techniques. The most obvious is the "live" coverage of an event from the scene as it happens. The second is the transmission of video news material from the field to the station via micro-wave. There it is video taped for editing and later insertion unto a

scheduled news program. The third technique is to video tape the story in the field, then physically return the tape to the station for use. Equipment permitting, such stories can be edited while in transit to the station.[5]

In the past, most video news stories have been recorded on 16 mm. film. Subsequent to shooting the story, the film had to be physically carried to a processing location. Only after processing could it be known what the quality of the film was, and only then could the process of editing the film begin. News directors point to the obvious time advantage of using the new video technology. Most deny money is a factor in the switch. There are trade-offs in costs which make it difficult to say that electronic journalism will indeed be cheaper than film, but there is reason to believe that the decision by the networks to make the switch may have been motivated more by the belief that electronic journalism will be cheaper in the long run than by a desire for better news.

CBS likes to take credit for leading the switch to ENG, but while CBS was making its widely publicized switch in Los Angeles, it was also cutting back on the length of newscasts on its owned station and firing large numbers of its local news staff.[6] The two events occurring at the same time leave some doubt about better news being at the heart of the network decision.[7]

Our basic premise in this study is that the switch to the new technology in news coverage is certain to bring about changes in what is covered for television news and <u>how</u> that news is covered. Our purpose is to find quantitative evidence of some of those changes.

Everyone is agreed that ENG is still painfully far from perfect. While the video cameras have become as small and light as film cameras, they are useless without heavy and bulky additional equipment to record and transmit the video picture.

A film camera is a self-contained recording device. A film crew can easily be transported with its equipment in a station wagon. A video camera crew usually requires at least a small van and the presence of an engineer to operate and maintain the more sensitive equipment. This has led to the replacement of film cameramen with engineers, who often have much to learn about news camera work.

A primary problem for ENG is that the signal must be transmitted at frequencies which require line-of-sight contact. Difficulties arise where the terrain is not level or the buildings are high. This applies not only to getting the picture from the van to the station, but also to getting the picture from the camera to the van where the distance is too great to run cable. Network executives blithely shrug this problem off with talk of "bouncing signals" or portable retransmitting units. Interviews with a number of ENG crews, however, suggest that the line-of-sight limitation has severely restricted the use of camera-to-van hook-ups. Instead, the general procedure is to take a portable video recorder with the camera. This creates a load considerably greater than would a film camera. The video taped material is then returned to the van which may be moved to a suitable location for transmitting the tape to the station. However, if air time is some hours away, it is not uncommon to transport the video tape back to the studio, as would be done with film. Much of the time advantage that ENG could provide is therefore not used, although the potential for such use is there should the situation demand.

In all, we find that the ENG process can be either immediate or equivalent to the time required with film; that a news cameraman is being replaced by an engineer; that line-of-sight signals do limit capabilities; and, that it is still doubtful if ENG will reduce costs or increase news reporting efficiency.

These seem to be the journalistic ENG issues nationally, though for this study a look at the Los Angeles scene is also necessary as local conditions were a chief reason for this investigation being undertaken.

The Los Angeles metropolitan area is one of three cities in the nation where the three major networks have their owned and operated (O&O) stations competing head-on at 5 p.m. weekdays for local news viewership. Beyond this direct competition, it was known that one of the three, CBS, was in the midst of converting its local news to total ENG as an experiment for other CBS O&O stations. CBS's local station, KNXT, had been in this transition process for almost six months when this research began. Therefore, we had three stations in direct competition--each with about the same unlimited resources for news-gathering--and one of the three was commited to going full ENG. We wondered what differences the new technology would make in the local station's news, and we had local broadcasters willing to discuss the situation.

In the Los Angeles basin, the three network O&O stations compete against four VHF independents and eight UHF stations for an audience of millions. Competition for news-hungry viewers is keen, and no one has a sure lead. The CBS outlet, KNXT, which dominated the ratings of news broadcasts in the sixties, has lately been running last among the O&Os. New faces have appeared on the tube since those golden years, and some have disappeared. Women are now serving as anchorpersons on all three network stations. There is much more of a racial mixture than there used to be.

News departments have likewise been trying hard to assimilate and make effective use of advances in ENG. The pioneer in the local field, and the station that appears to be most enthusiastic about ENG is KNXT. Since 1971, KNXT has been working with CBS to improve its news gathering tools. In 1974, when the SLA shot it out with police in south Los Angeles, KNXT crews were on

the spot with a 70-pound electronic camera and a borrowed truck equipped with microwave that brought live coverage of the event into millions of Southern California homes. Now with two vans of its own and three crews converted to ENG, KNXT is moving fast toward total conversion to the new medium.

"To say that KNXT news is in turmoil at the present time would be an understatement," Jeff Wald, in charge of the station's ENG operation, told a group of Los Angeles area journalists.[8] Five new vans are being equipped to cover, tape, edit and transmit news. New 8-pound minicameras with 13-pound back packs are being acquired. In addition to the vans, KNXT will have three station wagons equipped with video cameras and tape recorders. Though these will lack transmitters, their crews can either return tapes to the station, or relay stories from the nearest van.

Two receiver sites have been established, one in Beverly Hills and one on Mount Wilson. And more will be acquired. These will relay signals from the vans, whenever line-of-sight transmission from van to home base is not possible.

Over at KABC, the pace of change is slower. Although, as at KNXT, the station now has two ENG vans, conversion of remaining units is expected to take two or three years. And even then, only about 70 or 80% of the news will be reported electronically.

"We think that right now, for you and for us, the best operation is a mix of minicam equipment and film," Carl Twentier, KABC executive news producer, told the same group of journalists.

He acknowledged that KABC has occasionally fallen victim to "public relations stunts," and has played to the minicam, stressing immediacy rather than more important news values. But he predicted that as knowledge of the medium matures, ENG will enable KABC to provide better, more informative news.

KNBC finds itself between its two rivals in the pace of the switch to electronic journalism. Bob Eaton, until recently KNBC news director, predicted the station will be about half converted to ENG by the end of 1977. It now has two working ENG units in addition to 10 or 12 film crews. But within a few months there will be five ENG units in operation.

Eaton acknowledged the advantages of ENG, including major savings in film costs--now running at half a million dollars a year for the station. But he pointed out that very few reporters can handle live reporting situations well.

These, then, were the ENG positions of the three network O&O stations at the time of this Los Angeles area study. Knowledge of the stations' capabilities and some of journalistic problems of ENG led to our hypotheses.

Hypotheses

We felt that being involved in ENG would result first in a concerted effort to display the process, therefore our first hypothesis was:

1) The local CBS station would have more ENG reports in its newscasts, and these reports would be more likely to be aired in the news show's opening moments.

The first hypothesis contains no value judgments of the appropriateness of using more ENG reports or placing them earlier in the news show.

Our second hypothesis is related to the first:

2) The local CBS station would have a greater percentage of its news stories produced in the Southern California area.

Here we are dealing more with the production site of the story than with "location" of the story as the term usually applies. If a representative of the Mexican government visits Los Angeles and is interviewed at a local

fiesta on the topic of Mexican currency devaluation, this would be a locally produced story (though it would normally be considered an "international" story). The distinction is important because the hypothesis alleges only that ENG will result in more local production of news stories--not necessarily in more emphasis on local news.

Our third hypothesis begins to deal with value judgments rather than quantity differences that might result from using ENG. Here we suspect that using the electronic journalism will result in more news stories that show attention grabbing action:

3) ENG reports would stress action more than stories prepared through non-ENG processes.

The implication is that ENG crews will be drawn to news events that offer a more exciting visual appeal: fires, wrecks, dramatic events which may or may not otherwise be newsworthy. We suspect that ENG capability will result in rushing a crew to the scene of a minor freeway accident and in airing the report as long as smoke or flame is still visible in the video.

Finally, and related to the third hypothesis, we suspected the ENG station would be more likely to use electronic reports that stressed visuals (whether or not they were dramatic) or that stressed immediacy:

4) The local CBS station's ENG reports would be identified as having been selected because of immediacy or visual impact rather than a more legitimate news value.

"Immediacy" was defined as a report from an event that was taking place during the local newscast or which had taken place within only two hours prior to the local newscast. We felt there was a likelihood traditional news values such as consequence, conflict, eminence-prominence and novelty

would be sacrificed for visual impact and the questionable quality of airing a story because it was taking place at news time.

A note of clarification may be necessary with hypothesis four. Timeliness is a legitimate news value, especially for the broadcast media, but only if events are actually unfolding at the scene. Too often with "live" coverage the timeliness aspect is really an availability aspect such as when the on-scene reporter does a standup which begins, "I'm standing in the courtroom where the jury is expected to return later this week and present its verdict on...."

In all, then, the hypotheses suggest that ENG technology is still more of a ratings tool than a reporting tool; that it may at this point be more of a handicap than an improvement for serious news reporting.[9]

Methodology

The method for hypothesis testing in this study is a rather straightforward content analysis scheme. We taped the 5 to 5:30 p.m. sequents of local newscasts on the three network-owned stations in Los Angeles for five days during mid-March. Our rationale for using the O&O stations was to equate staff size and rescources of the station. We taped the first half hour of evening news because we wanted to examine reports the news directors would have deemed the most important, and because the opening sequence would be relatively free of departmental segments such as sports, weather and stock market. It should be noted that NBC and ABC do a two-hour local news from 5 to 7 p.m. while CBS does only a one-hour show from 5 to 6 p.m., but we felt the difference in total length of the news shows would not influence the comparisons in this study. Five days of newscasts provided an average 84 news stories per station and was the maximum taping our resources would allow. Finally, the mid-March week, from March 14 to March 21, was selected

because a class of senior-level research journalism students could be counted on to perform the analysis at that time.

One difficulty did arise during the taping week: a Presidential speech on Thursday altered the local news schedule. We did not, therefore, have a full week of newscasts, but we did add a second Monday for the fifth day of taping.

The only serious problem with the content analysis was establishing a viable coding form that could result in an intercoder reliability rating of 80%. Rather than discussing the difficulties, we will describe the form that did reach this reliability level and which was used by the coders.

The class of senior-level journalists was instructed to make judgments on each separate story, without regard to the length of stories, and with the exception of sports, weather and the stock market report. The first judgment was type of news story, and this category was simply dichotomized into 1) a story with a definite news peg and 2) a story with no definite news peg. The second item was a decision based on the most complex visual image that appeared on-screen during each news story. Categories were arranged in ascending order of complexity from 1) anchorperson reading the news--nothing else seen; to 2) anchorperson reading with a "still" visual--a slide, drawing, etc.; 3) film or video tape sequence; and, 4) "live" report where there is notification that the sequence is live or a mini-camera report.

The third distinction was the location at which the most complex visual image in the story was produced. Categories were: 1) at this station's studio; 2) in the greater Los Angeles area; 3) in California, but not in the Los Angeles area; and, 4) outside California.

The last two coding decisions were to be made only if the most complex visual sequence in the story had already been determined to be a film, tape or live sequence. If one of these three, the coder was to record first if the visuals contained attention grabbing action such as drama, controversy, fire, auto accidents or very heated interviews. Then the coders were to determine if the visual sequence had been selected 1) because of its visual impact--what was seen was more important or more interesting than what was said; 2) because of its immediacy--the event happened during the newscast or within two hours prior to the newscast; or, 3) it was selected for a reason other than one of visual impact or immediacy.

Table 1

Intercoder reliability for five decision points.

Story Type	On Screen	Production Location	Visual Action	Why Story Was Chosen	Over All Reliability
90.1%	96.1%	89.3%	75.4%	68.6%	83.9%

Table 1 gives the intercoder reliability rating for each of the categories separately. The overall reliability rating was 83.9% for all five decision points, and only coders who have achieved 80% agreement on the entire form were selected for coding the tapes.

Some Descriptive Data

In exploratory studies of this type, it is often worthwhile to look at the frequencies for a general impression of the data base. Table 2 offers some descriptive statistics of interest. We found first that the three channels had different formats in the length and number of news stories used during the first half hour of local newscasts. NBC had only 60 stories during the five days, or an average of 12 news stories per day; CBS aired

86 stories or an average of 17 news stories during the first half hour of the show; and ABC had 106 news stories or 21 reports during the same time frame of its local newscast.

Table 2

Selected descriptive data.

Number of Stories Coded in first 30 Minutes		
CBS	86	34%
NBC	60	24%
ABC	106	42%

What was Seen on Screen During Most Complex Visual Sequence of News Story		
Anchorperson Reading Only	38	15%
Anchorperson & Still Visual	53	21%
Film or Video Tape Sequence	152	60%
Live or Mini-Cam Sequence	9	4%

Impact of Non-Studio Sequences		
Attention Grabbing	35	22%
Not Attention Grabbing	127	78%

Stories Judged to Have a Definite News Value		
News Peg	207	82%
No News Peg	45	18%

News Story Production Site		
In Studio	89	35%
L.A. Area	100	40%
Elsewhere in California	8	3%
Not in California	55	22%

Reason Judged for Selection of Non-Studio Sequences		
Visual Impact	21	13%
Immediacy	14	9%
News Value	129	78%

Four out of five stories, as a whole, were judged by coders to be news-related as opposed to having no definite news peg.

The coding scheme, which was based on recording the most complex visual portion of each news story, shows an emphasis on visual presentation. We found that the majority of stories contained a film, video tape or live sequence, and even of those reports limited to an anchorperson reading the news a majority contained still visuals (drawing, slides, photographs, etc.) as opposed to no visuals. The limited number of live or mini-camera reports (a total of only nine such sequences in 252 news stories) is a finding that seriously detracts from the most complete investigation of this study's hypotheses. It requires some discussion.

We believe finding only nine definite ENG reports during a week of broadcasting is not unusual. To be identified as either "live" or "mini-cam", a report would require some news justification during the 5 to 5:30 time frame that was made the basis for this investigation. Yet we believe a portion of the "film or taped" reports emanating from the Los Angeles area were in fact ENG reports which were sent or brought to the studio via tape and used without ENG identification, (certainly the proper way to handle this type of material). Therefore, the study contains some local ENG productions which could not be isolated from locally-produced filmed reports. Much of what we are investigating from an ENG perspective, then, is an inference based on our knowledge of the electronic news gathering capabilities of the three local network stations, and their commitment to electronic journalism. The limited number of specifically identified ENG reports is a weakness of the study, but one which could have been avoided only by substantially increasing our taping data base--and resources did not permit an increase in taping.

In looking at the remainder of the descriptive data, we found that 40% of the news reports were produced in the Los Angeles area, outside the television station's studios. Again, some of these 100 news reports must be ENG productions and our hypotheses will focus on these as well as the nine which were clearly identified as being electronic reports.

Of the non-studio-produced sequences, 22% were judged to be dramatic, attention grabbing visuals. The raters also identified 22% of the non-studio reports as having been selected primarily for visual impact or their immediacy rather than for inherent news value.

With these impressions from the tabulated data, we may begin our analysis.

Analysis of Data

Our first hypothesis suggests that CBS, which has experimented more with and is more firmly commited to ENG, will have a larger percentage of live or minicamera reports. Table 3 indicates that this is not the case. In actual number of reports, CBS had three, NBC had four and ABC had two; but, because of the difference in number of total reports, NBC's percentage of live or minicam stories was twice that aired by the other two local network stations.

Table 3

Percent of total stories that are live.

	CBS	NBC	ABC
Anchorperson Reading News	42%	35%	32%
Film or Video Tape Sequence	55	58	66
Live or Mini-Cam Sequence	3	7	2

$X^2=4.8$; 4 d_f; $p=.31$

Still, because there were so few such news stories, the table indicates no significant differences among the three stations on the percentage of live reports carried.

The first hypothesis also states that live reports will tend to be used as "showcase" reports, being more likely to be aired in the early minutes of the newscast. Table 4 shows no statistically significant differences in the placement of story types, but does reveal the expected pattern: of the live reports, a majority were placed among the first five stories of the newscasts on the channels.

Table 4

Percent of visual types used in opening segment of newscast.

	Among First Five Stories	Not Among First Five
Anchorperson Reading News	23%	77%
Film or Video Tape Sequence	32	68
Live or Mini-Cam Sequence	56	44

$X^2=5.3$; 2 d_f; $p=.07$

Further, the showcase concept seems to be an accepted fact in scheduling as the majority of live reports do come among the first five stories; nearly a third of the film or tape reports are among the first five stories; and less than a fourth of the stories with only an anchorperson reading the news are among the first five stories.

The evidence from tables 3 and 4 favors rejecting the first hypothesis' suggestion that CBS would carry a greater percentage of live reports, but lends credence to the idea that stations try to use visuals among their lead stories.

The second hypothesis is analyzed by relying on locally-produced, out-of-studio news stories. Table 5 gives this analysis and shows no significant

differences between the percentage of Los Angeles area out-of-studio stories carried by CBS and the percentage carried by the two other stations. Although CBS's percentage is slightly higher than NBC's for these local stories, the differences do not support the contention and we are unable to attribute ENG facilities to an increase in local visual coverage.

Table 5

Percent of news stories produced out of the studios studios but in the greater Los Angeles area.

	Produced In L.A. Area	Studio Produced or Outside L.A.
CBS	44%	56%
NBC	42	58
ABC	35	65

$X^2=1.8$; 2 d_f; $p=.40$

Our third hypothesis suggested there would be a tendency for ENG reports to be used more because of their visual impact: that these reports would be more likely to contain attention grabbing action. Table 6 shows this, is not the case, a greater percentage of film or video tape sequences contained attention grabbing action than did the live reports. Though, as has been pointed out, we believe some of the film and taped sequences are actually ENG productions, we were unable to support hypothesis three from our limited live production data base.

Table 6

Percent of out-of-studio sequences judged "attention grabbing."

	Attention Grabbing	Not Attention Grabbing
Film or Video Tape Sequence	22%	78%
Live or Mini-Cam Sequence	11	89

X^2=.12; 1 d_f; p=.73

The last hypothesis also relies on locally-produced, out-of-studio news stories for analysis. Table 7 does indicate that coders determined a significant percentage of these stories were selected for reasons other than their intrinsic news value on two of the three local network stations.

Table 7

Reasons judged for use of out-of-studio sequences, by news channel.

	Visual Impact	Immediacy	News Value
CBS	22%	6%	72%
NBC	8	18	74
ABC	10	5	85

X^2=10.3; 4 d_f; p=.04

We found that a significantly larger percentage of the CBS stories seemed to be selected for their visual impact and a significantly larger percentage of the NBC stories seemed to be chosen for immediacy. Though these differences have been documented, we are unable to show from these

data that ENG reports are being aired for reasons other than legitimate news value. We therefore reject our fourth hypothesis.

Conclusions and Discussion

The data analysis was unable to support the major contentions our hypotheses suggested. We believe some of the difficulty lies in the limited number of identified live and minicamera reports, but we also feel that a broader data base would not have confirmed our views of ENG's effects on news selection.

Se did document a tendency to use visual presentations and live reports as news showcase pieces--with an inordinate percentage of such presentations at the opening minutes of local newscasts. We also found two of the three local stations base selection of some news reports on decisions other than news value alone.

Yet we could not document any significant differences, either positive or negative, in news selection or in news presentation that could be attributed solely to electronic newsgathering. We must conclude that at this time--while none of the three network stations is gathering a majority of its local news electronically--ENG is having no distinct effect on the local news reports a viewer may see.

We may speculate that ENG today is an internal newsroom alteration, much as electronic typesetting in the editorial departments of newspapers. ENG appears to be an internal efficiency that will be adopted by broadcast news teams without much alteration in news emphasis and without much public fanfare.

Footnotes

[1]Ann Zusy, "ENG Is Rapidly Changing Broadcast Journalism," RTNDA Communicator, August, 1975, pp. 10-11.

[2]"London plans television-equipped van for broadcast of outdoor scenes; program troubles," New York Times, Jan. 17, 1937, p. 10

[3]"NBC to broadcast Truth or Consequences from pre-recorded magnetic tape; 1st tape recording will be Pres. Innauguration," New York Times, Jan. 18, 1957, p. 45.

[4]"RCA develops 19-lb. TV camera and portable transmitter able to send picture to relay station over 1-mi. away," New York Times, Jan. 23, 1956, p. 41.

[5]Christopher Desmond, vice president and general manager of KNXT. Remarks to The Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, Los Angeles Chapter, at Greater Los Angeles Press Club, December 14, 1977.

[6]"The Making of Top 20 News at CBS," New West, July 19, 1976, p. 27.

[7]David Chagall, "Only as Good as His Skin Tests," TV Guide, (March 26, 1977); Vol. 25, No. 13, p. 5

[8]Jeff Wald, Carl Twentier and Bob Eaton, ENG operations managers at Los Angeles network stations. Remarks to The Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, Los Angeles Chapter, at Greater Los Angeles Press Club, March 24, 1977.

[9]Phillip O. Keirstead, "ENG 'Live' news from almost anywhere," The Quill, (May, 1976), pp. 25-29.